What is School Readiness?

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In South Africa, by law, children have to go to Grade 1 the year in which they turn seven. It is also permitted to start Grade 1 a year earlier, provided that the child turns six by June 30 of his Grade 1 year. Unfortunately we can not only gauge a child's readiness for school by his age. The child's development should be on par with the development of other children of the same age. When we talk about development, we have to look at the different aspects thereof: emotional, social, physical, intellectual and language development. These should all be considered, before deciding if he is ready for Grade 1. We can therefore say that school readiness refers to the child's total readiness to benefit from formal education. School readiness assessment results are not supposed to be used to discriminate against any learner or to fill classes. The whole reason why we do these assessments is to provide relevant support.

Why is it important for a parent to know whether their child is school ready?

Some parents feel pressure from family and the larger community to send their children to school as soon as possible. If a parent knows whether their child is school ready or not, they can make informed decisions regarding their child. If they realize that their child is not ready, there are numerous programmes or interventions that can be followed to help the child to develop and mature.

This knowledge, could guide them to a professional person that can help them. The sooner barriers are identified; the sooner and more efficiently your child can be helped. It is not true that barriers, left alone, without any intervention, will go away by themselves.

It could also reduce the parent's anxiousness, if they know their child is ready for the challenges of Grade 1.

Why is it important for children to be ready to start Grade 1?

A child's experience of Grade 1 is of utmost importance, because it sets the tone for the years to follow. We want our children to have a positive experience. The more they feel they are able to succeed, the more they believe in themselves, the more they want to partake and learn in class. If a child cannot cope with what is expected from him in class, or if he feels like things are too hard, he might develop a fear and dislike in school.

Before deciding to send a five year old to school, parents should consider whether their child will have the same ability and self-confidence as the other six and seven year olds.

We don't want them to struggle through the first year. The formal expectations of a school beginner is already huge when they are ready, but when they are not, it can become a continuous battle.

I have seen many little ones during the years, who seemed ready and who coped in Grade 1, had to work just a little harder than their class mates to stand first or to get an distinction, because they went to school younger than them. I believe, not being ready for Grade 1, catches up with us somewhere in the future.

What if our child is not ready for the formal challenges of Grade 1?

Then he is not and that is ok. This means he needs more time and opportunity to develop. It might be that a child is physically ready for Grade 1, but that he is not 100% ready on an emotional level. At this point, as a parent we should remain calm, and think what would be best for the child. Children are all unique, and develop at different speeds. It does not mean that my child will not make a success of his life, because he did not go to school at five. A Grade R class is a perfect example of a stimulating, structured environment where he could develop further. Dr. Melodie de Jager rightly says:"Our children are vulnerable. We must look after them carefully if we want them to go to school all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed."

Who can help me, as a parent to determine if my child is ready for school?

Today there are many internet sites from where we can download information which is meat to help us to have an idea what is expected of our child in the beginning of Grade 1.

As a parent you are the one who knows your child the best. Trust your instincts, but also be willing to listen to people around you. If your child's pre-school teacher says she is worried that your little one lags in some area, considerer her recommendations. Never be pushed to send your child to school if you feel he is not ready. If you or the Pre-school are at all unsure, it would always be a good choice to let your child be assessed by a professional. Someone like an Educational Psychologist have all the tools and experience to help and guide you to make informed choices.

When is the best time for school readiness assessments to be done?

Ideally, continued assessments should have been part of your little ones pre-school years. Therefore his teachers would have kept abreast with his development and how he matures. It is also a known fact, that our pre-school six year old goes through a "growth spurt" between September and November. During this time, we see a sudden and rapid developing in many of our six year old pre-schoolers. This means we should be careful not to do an assessment too early during the year. On the other hand we should not wait too late, because then there is not enough time to work on areas of need. My recommendation would be to do the assessment in the second term, as this is when enrolments at schools start, but leave room for the possibility of growth till the end of the year. Also keep in mind that a five year old would not have had a growth spurt by the time they start school.

Some (not nearly all) things they must be able to do in the beginning of Grade 1

- Language Development: takes turns in a conversation, uses language in order to make himself understood, have command of his mother tongue, follows instructions, use expressive and receptive language in the medium of the school's instruction

- Pre reading skills: names basic colours, knows phonics, recognizes his written name, be interested in books and reading

- Emotional skills: separate from the caregiver, works independently and in a group, shares educators attention

- Cognitive skills: copies patterns, concentrates, persists in tasks, knows position in space

- Numeracy skills: counts to 10, knows shapes, understands concepts of counting, sorting and grouping

- Physical skills: uses bathroom by himself, blows own nose, washes hands, crosses midline, kicks and catches a ball

- Social skills: takes turns, shares, listens, relates to peers and adults

Entering Grade 1 is a wonderful and exciting time in the life of our children and it is a parent's privilege to walk this rode with them. Luckily, there is help available if we are unsure about the way.

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